



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

LARUELLE'S 'CRIMINALLY PERFORMATIVE' THOUGHT: ON DOING AND SAYING IN NON-PHILOSOPHY

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A Non-Parmenidean Equation: Practice = Thought [...] In order to clearly distinguish philosophy, we will say that *practice and thought are identical in-the-last-instance*, or even that *practice is the presupposed that determines thought*. This is the non-Parmenidean paradigm and it must put an end to theoreticism and idealism, which are both the effect of philosophizability

François Laruelle (2012d), 114-15

As its name would imply, Laruelle's 'non-standard philosophy' (or just 'non-philosophy') poses as something other than standard philosophy. If it is connected to performance, then, it is not on account of its offering us a philosophy *of* performance. Indeed, to examine the means by which non-philosophy avoids becoming another 'philosophy of' x, y, or z, – *of* performance, for example – we must look at it in terms of its *activity*. What it attempts, Laruelle says, is '*not a new philosophical paradigm*' but the '*transformation of philosophy*' (Laruelle 2013a, 71). He is adamant that non-philosophy is a new 'practice of philosophy' rather than a 'philosophical taking of sides and thus inside philosophy' (45). Various commentators agree on this point, Rocco Gangle describing his work as a 'radically new form of thought', Robin Mackay, calling it 'a new mode of thought' (Gangle 2013, 6; Mackay and Laruelle 2012, 2).

A weak interpretation of such ascriptions might take them to imply merely a peculiar variation upon philosophical method (most often due to novel subject matter) whereas, in fact, Laruelle seeks a radical mutation in methodology and content *at the same time*. He seeks an 'experience of thought' that is even 'non-Greek' in terms of its philosophical trajectory (which, for Laruelle, means that it must avoid *logical identity* at all cost) (Laruelle 2013b, 116). While standard philosophical approaches take their conception of what proper philosophy is and then apply it to all and sundry objects – what Laruelle calls the '*Principle of Sufficient Philosophy*' – non-philosophy is a 'style of thought' that mutates with its object (Laruelle 2012b, 259). Hence, non-philosophy is neither 'theoretical nor practical nor aesthetic, etc., in the sense whereby philosophy defines separated regions of experience' (Laruelle 2013c, 285). It is all of these at once.

So, despite its own sometimes abstract and abstracted appearance, non-philosophy is intended to be a practical theory too. Indeed, it is forwarded as a performative thought that does things (to philosophy and to 'Theory' generally), albeit through words in Laruelle's own practice. Laruelle even goes so far as to say that '*non-philosophy is a practice, it is enacted [en acte], almost criminally performative [performative au crime près], this is the only way of demonstrating it*' (Laruelle 2014, 149, my italics). This practice involves taking the concepts of philosophy and attempting to extract all transcendence from them in order to review them as parts of the Real and no longer as representations.

Of course, non-philosophy is hardly unique in placing practice at the heart of its method, nor in endorsing a democratic pluralism as regards the definition of thought – many 'philosophies of difference' cherish such ideas too.¹ Yet Laruelle is not being naïve: he knows that such values (openness, practice, tolerance) are universally commended. What is different is Laruelle's constant acknowledgement of the difficulty of practicing them, of practicing tolerance towards all forms of thought and even of practicing practice (rather than taking the *proclamation* of its use as equivalent to its actual use). This concern with *consistency* in actually doing what one says and saying what one does, is crucial to the difference between philosophy and non-philosophy – it is its essential, *performative* element: 'But we know through the philosophers themselves, in an undoubtedly still limited manner, that they do not say what they are doing, and do not do what they are saying' (Laruelle 2013c, 142).

Even the most open philosophies (of difference) still aspire to seize reality exclusively. Deleuze, for example, believes that thought should think of itself as immanent to the Real, rather than as a representation that transcends it. So far, so non-philosophical perhaps. Yet Deleuze would perform this explanation *in the name of his philosophy*: the image of thought he has in mind is as depicted in his explanation, with all its architectonics of the Real readily defined and hierarchized (virtual versus actual, Bodies without Organs versus the organism, war machines, rhizomes, and so on). Even though Deleuze embraces multiplicity and a variety of kinds of thought in what he says (artistic and scientific as well as philosophical), all the same, *what enables him to say this* is his own highest thought, or 'creation of concepts': it is *this* that belongs to Deleuzian philosophy alone. *He* explains the Real, not Boulez, nor Artaud, nor Bacon (they provide the material for the philosopher). For *this* is Deleuze's performative, though it is one that does *not* do what it says.

The same even goes for Deleuze and philosophy as such. Co-authoring a book on philosophy (with Félix Guattari) is a performative act, according to Laruelle:

Let's suppose that there exists a book called 'What is philosophy?' and that it claims to answer this question by virtue of its own existence or manifestation. Thus it is impossible to talk about it: because this book is at the center of philosophy and philosophy is at the center of this book; because *philosophia sive natura* and one does not converse with God.... (Laruelle 2012c, 41)

Because he remains a philosopher, Deleuze cannot *enact* the egalitarian demands of radical immanence that he espouses in his (and Guattari's) *What is Philosophy?* This is not a matter of unwitting self-deception or bad faith, though, nor of conscious duplicity. It is part and parcel of the nature of philosophical thought as 'auto-positional' or self-positing. For Laruelle, there is no explaining what the Real 'really is', because every thought, *be it Deleuzian or not, be it philosophical or not*, is as good or as bad an explanation as any other – for they are all (non-summative) material parts.

What follows from an axiom of radical immanence, if acted upon, is that non-philosophy *does do what it is saying*. Or at least it *says that it does* (such consistent practice is easier said than done). And, indeed, who is to judge whether it has been successful? Undoubtedly, there a number of problems that emerge when it comes to evaluating such immanent performativity. For a start, it may be that Laruelle is deluding himself as to his own consistency and actually falling into performative contradiction whenever he refers to his own thought as an 'identity of saying and doing' (simply because he is *describing* what he is doing *elsewhere* instead of doing it *here* – Laruelle 2013c, 175). Secondly, on one level it is just trivially true that *any* utterance is a kind of action. What is less obvious is when an utterance's 'form' and 'content' are one and the same (if such a duality can be applied to Laruelle). What is most in need of argument, however, is the notion that *this* saying, here and now, both expresses and embodies what it says consistently in all contexts. If, that is, 'this' is what Laruelle means by consistency (it is the nature of this 'this' that must be unraveled).

Regardless of its best efforts, for Laruelle there is a constitutive disingenuousness in (any one) philosophy given its ongoing desire to explain reality from *its* position. Even when a philosophy is seemingly aware of its own performativity and the impossibility of transcending it, it still attempts to side-step the implications of such radical immanence. *Its* act, there, is always the *exception* to the case:

The philosopher, legislating for reason, the life of the mind [*vie de la pensée*] or social life, makes an exception even of the fact that he does not do what he says or does not say what he does, but, speaking the law, he makes an exception and enjoys the privilege of speaking about it and imposing it with his authority. I speak the truth, says the liar; I speak democracy, says the anti-democrat: this is the paradox of the philosopher as thinker of the Whole who is never short of expedients for presenting the paradox as if it were acceptable. (Laruelle 2012a, 230).

For there is the rub: if *inconsistency* is the content of one's thought, of one's argument, and philosophy is auto-position *par excellence* (the coherence of a self-identical argument), then one must continually invent new ways of arguing that no longer appear either as philosophical, nor even as coherent. There must be auto-mutation or self-destruction built-in. By pushing this idea to its practicable limit, Laruelle produces the strange vision of a non-philosophical 'philosophy'. Hence, his approach must be seen as performative *all the time*. In fact, this is its primary constraint:

In non-philosophy, thought in act is not distinct, in its essence at least, from its effects or its speech because, if it is relatively free regarding its cause, this is its cause as imprinted with a radical performativity, unlike philosophy which only reaches this under the form of a circle, or more or less a circle, or in another case some sort of unconscious which destroys it. Non-philosophy is constrained -- materials aside -- to do what it says and say what it does. (Laruelle 2013c, 157)²

This approach also helps us to evaluate such performances without recourse to an elitism of 'art' to provide norms of judgment (given that we have nowhere attempted a definition of good art). Significantly, the question of evaluation is raised inadvertently by Ray Brassier in his following rumination upon non-philosophy's immanent pragmatics:

Philosophers, Laruelle insists, do not know what they are doing. They are never doing what they say or saying what they are doing – even and especially when they purport to be able to legitimate their philosophical decisions in terms of some ethical, political or juridical end. The theoreticist idealism inherent in decision is never so subtle and pernicious as when it invokes the putative materiality of some extra-philosophical instance in order to demonstrate its 'pragmatic worth'. To condemn Laruelle for excessive abstraction on the grounds that the worth of a philosophy can only be gauged in terms of its concrete, extra-philosophical (e.g. ethical, political or juridical) effects is to ignore the way in which extra-philosophical concretion invariably involves an idealized abstraction that has already been circumscribed by decision. It may be that Laruelle's crisp, sharply delineated mode of abstraction turns out to be far more concrete than those nebulous abstractions which philosophers try to pass off as instances of concretion. In other words, the criteria for evaluating the worth of non-philosophy's function for philosophy are not available to philosophers, who know not what they do. In non-philosophy, radical axiomatic abstraction gives rise, not to a system or doctrine inviting assent or dissent, but to an immanent methodology whose function for philosophy no one is in a position to evaluate as yet. Ultimately, then, non-philosophy can only be gauged in terms of what it can do. And no one yet knows what non-philosophy can or cannot do. (Brassier 2003, 34)

Non-philosophy is an unknown quantity with an 'an immanent methodology whose function for philosophy no one is in a position to evaluate as yet'. Laruelle himself expresses an allied point: there is no basis upon which non-philosophy can be commended that is itself *philosophically necessary*:

There is then no imperative fixing a transcendent, ontotheo-logical necessity to 'do non-philosophy': this is a 'posture' or a 'force-(of)-thought' which has only the criterion of immanence as its real cause -- which takes itself performatively as force-(of)-thought -- and the occasion of its *data*; which contents itself to posit axioms or hypotheses in the transcendental mode and to deduce or induce starting from them. (Laruelle 2013c, 198-9)

Non-philosophy is a posture – a set of performed axioms. However, whereas Brassier is correct to see a radically immanent thought as its own obstruction to evaluation (or being 'gauged'), the concepts of posture and performance may well lead us out of this labyrinth.

What is the 'concrete' worth, and what is the mere 'abstraction' referred to in the quotation from Brassier? If the concrete has inherent value (ethical, political or juridical), how is it determined? In other words, how do abstract norms *follow* from (concrete) facts (without contravening Hume's 'is/ought' fallacy)?³ These are standard dilemmas for philosophy, philosophically posed in terms of epistemic, representational norms (they 'know not what they do', 'no one yet knows' etc.). But what if 'following' were understood behaviorally as *orientation*? It could then *itself act as a norm* to be embraced or resisted *behaviorally*, that is, followed or not followed. Movement through space can itself be a quality and not only a quantity. It can be (seen as) a performance, a demonstration, an axiomatic *and* axiological posture.

As another option, we could forego all positions, open or closed, and discover an evaluation, or 'following', *qua* immanent performance. This would entail that *this evaluation itself* is rendered into a following, a performance, a behavior. And some followings follow more and are followed by more. Naturally, this 'more' is quantitative, but it is also *affective* – being more democratic, more inclusive, and with that less abusive. On this understanding, therefore, a minimal condition for one performance to be preferred over another would be on account of its ever-increasing, broadening movement that incorporates and acknowledges the 'non-' of others in widening circles, in ever more attentive ethologies. What such 'centripetal' performances denote specifically (through the 'body', through a kind of gesture, through ethology) must remain undefined. However,

It will be asked: is that real? We reply: *this* is precisely the real itself. *This* description is an immanent or transcendental auto-description and signifies that vision-in-One is an absolute thought. (Laruelle 2013b, 75, my italics)

Of course, the indexicality of the demonstrative – the *when and where* of this '*this* description' – is crucial: was it spoken in a lecture, written (and re-written) in a book, or read (and re-read) later? Which was the performance? This is why Rocco Gangle describes the interpretations that non-philosophy makes of philosophy as a '*generalised indexicality*' and its clones as a '*radical that-ness*' (Gangle 2013, 177, 206). In the end, for non-philosophy the seemingly fixed categories of discourse or performance, theory or practice, are unwieldy unless they too mutate. Hence, Laruelle's critique of deconstruction as a petrified method and philosophical position held together 'as a forced yoke, through the genius, that is, the violence of a single man' (Laruelle 2010, 108). Beyond everything, it is ultimately the Real that acts – this is Laruelle's ultra-realism that we only approximate *through*

broad spectra (of performance, or art) in the *enactment* of their broadening in specific situations. So, in parallel: when Laruelle says that *his* thought is determined by the Real – it must be that *this* thought, as now performed, is determined, now, by the Real. *This* is the performed immanence over representation. A representational view of *this* thought (one pointing away – so that he is supposedly referring to *another* thought) would be, by contrast, a lie or the *non*-doing of saying. The non-representational account would be the broadened view of performance that, being radically consistent, must incorporate every (non-) philosophical act. Which is what we do here.⁴

Notes

¹ Deleuze, for example, appears to avoid the bifurcation of philosophical theory and practice. As Badiou has noted, Deleuze wanted a 'philosophy "of" nature' understood as a 'description in thought of the life of the world, such that the life thus described might include, as one of its living gestures, the description' itself (Badiou 1994, 63). Whether he succeeded, and what would count as success, remains moot.

² My translation of 'to do what' in place of 'from doing what': original French in *Principes de la Non-Philosophie* (1996, 191): 'la non-philosophie est contrainte - au matériau près - de faire ce qu'elle dit et de dire ce qu'elle fait'.

³ See David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1960, 469-470), where he admonishes the illegitimate extrapolation of values from factual matters. Just because, for example, the majority of people behave in a certain way does not entail that they ought to behave in that way.

⁴ For more on this broadened view of performance, see Ó Maoilearca 2015.

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Biography

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